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"THE RIME OF THE ANCIENT MARINER": A SEMINAR STUDY

Thinking that he may not be alone in his difficulty "to get started" when a critical paper is to be written, the writer takes the liberty of submitting to his Council brethren a form that he has found helpful in his own work. Furthermore, it is hoped that, in spite of its many imperfections, the following study may not be found entirely wanting in value as an independent analysis of a poem we all love.

It shall be the object of the present discussion briefly to inquire into the meaning of the poem, to note some of the more prominent characteristics of form, and to glance at a few technical excellences.

Meaning.—There is always present the danger of reading into a fantasy more symbolism than was intended by the author himself. Nevertheless, in "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" there are certain details that are obviously allegorical. These shall occupy our attention for a few moments.

The story is primarily one of conscience. The ancient sin-sick sailor stops the guest on the way to a wedding-feast—a feast of life and hope—to tell him a story of death and despair. "There was a ship," begins the mariner. There is fine artistry in this line, suggesting as it does the monomaniac's directness in betraying what is uppermost in his mind.

After the concrete representation of sin, the shooting of the albatross, conscience begins its ravages. The body of the bird is hung around the murderer's neck. Like Peer Gynt's troll, it is the cross he must bear. Death claims his shipmates, but his portion is Life-in-Death—remorse. In his hours of darkness, he despises the creatures of the calm, envies that they should live while so many men are dead.

His redemption is effected, as was the redemption of mankind, by Love. When he blesses the water-snakes, the albatross falls off; sleep comes; the rain slakes his thirst; angels inhabit the bodies of the dead men; the ship moves on; the cross is almost lifted—almost; for, although "the man hath penance done," he "penance more will do."

Finally the "spell snaps"; the breezes blow softly again; the sailor sights his native shores; and the spirits leave the dead bodies and assume "their own forms" of light. The curse is over, but the recollections still remain. In religion alone can he find peace: he asks the hermit "to shrieve him."

As the mariner leaves it, the ship of sin suddenly sinks. The sailor tells his story to the holy man. For a moment the agony seizes him; "then it left me free." It returns only at intervals, so that the tale may be told to the souls that need it.

Its moral, the moral that leaves the hearer "a wiser man," has already been indicated:

He prayeth best, who loveth best
All things both great and small;
For the dear God who loveth us,
He made and loveth all. (ll. 614-17)

Form.—The poem is written in iambic meter, the first and third lines of each regular stanza containing four, and the second and fourth, three feet. The regular stanza form has four lines, rhyming *abcb*. There are, besides, eighteen five-line stanzas, with the first, third, and fourth lines tetrameter, and the second and fifth trimeter, with a rhyme scheme of *abccb*. There are also seventeen six-line stanzas, with the odd lines tetrameter, and the even trimeter. The stanza beginning line forty-five is irregular in that its second line contains four feet. The rhyme-scheme of these stanzas is not uniform, the chief arrangement being *abcbdb*, with variations of *abbcde* and *ababab*. Finally there is one stanza of nine lines, the first, second, fourth, fifth, seventh, and eighth tetrameter, and the third, sixth, and ninth trimeter, rhyming *aabcbddb*. It will be noticed that the rhyme in all cases is between lines of the same length. The penult line in a number of stanzas has an internal rhyme. In one or two instances there is an internal rhyme in lines other than the penult. An example of this is found in line 21 (*first* line of fifth stanza):

The ship was cheered, the harbour cleared.

Technique.—Repetition is perhaps the device most used. There are recurrences of words, of phrases, of lines, and of practically entire stanzas. While some of these echoings secure connection and emphasis, Coleridge seems to have employed them principally for the sheer music of the thing. A few examples of each kind will illustrate this.

Of words: "Bright-eyed" is an epithet that will immediately come to mind. There are still more daring iterations:

The *ice* was all between
The *ice* was here, the *ice* was there,
The *ice* was all around. (ll. 58-60)

Water, water, everywhere,
And all the boards did shrink;
Water, water, everywhere
Nor any drop to drink. (ll. 119-22)

There passed a *weary* time

A *weary* time! a *weary* time!

How glazed each *weary* eye. (ll. 143-48)

Alone, alone, all, all *alone*,

Alone on a *wide wide* sea! (ll. 231-32)

Of phrases: We all remember the "glittering eye" and the "skinny hand." Note also:

Day after day, day after day. (l. 115)

Nine fathom deep. (ll. 133 and 377)

To and fro. (ll. 315-16)

Fly, brother, fly! more high, more high! (l. 426)

A *weary* time. (*supra*)

Of lines:

The Wedding-Guest he [*here*] beat his breast. (ll. 31 and 37)

For [*then*] all averred, I had killed the bird. (ll. 93 and 99)

From the land of mist and snow. (ll. 134 and 378)

I fear thee, ancient Mariner! (ll. 224 and 345)

Alone on a wide wide sea! (ll. 233 and 598)

And I blest them unaware. (ll. 285 and 287)

With a short uneasy motion. (ll. 386 and 388)

This seraph-band, each waved his hand. (ll. 492 and 496)

To walk together to the kirk. (ll. 603 and 605)

Stanza echoings.—With:

The Wedding-Guest sat on a stone:

He cannot choose but hear;

And thus spake on that ancient man,

The bright-eyed Mariner (ll. 17-20)

compare:

The Wedding-Guest he beat his breast,

Yet he cannot choose but hear;

And thus spake on that ancient man,

The bright-eyed Mariner. (ll. 37-40)

With:

The sun came up upon the left,

Out of the sea came he!

And he shone bright, and on the right

Went down into the sea (ll. 29-32)

compare:

The Sun now rose upon the right:
Out of the sea came he,
Still hid in mist, and on the left
Went down into the sea. (ll. 83-86)

With:

And a good south wind sprung up behind;
The Albatross did follow,
And every day, for food or play,
Came to the mariner's hollo! (ll. 71-74)

compare:

And the good south wind still blew behind,
But no sweet bird did follow,
Nor any day for food or play
Came to the mariner's hollo! (ll. 87-90)

Compare the figure in the following:

As who pursued with yell and blow
Still treads the shadow of his foe,
And forward bends his head (ll. 46-48)

with this:

Like one, that on a lonesome road
Doth walk in fear and dread,
And having once turned round walks on,
And turns no more his head;
Because he knows, a frightful fiend
Doth close behind him tread. (ll. 446-51)

A striking onomatopoeia is found in line 218:

With heavy thump, a lifeless lump.

Besides the dulness of tone, notice the retarding effect of the *l*'s in "a lifeless lump," much as in Pope's oft-quoted line, "like the wounded snake, drags its slow length along."

We have dwelt somewhat in detail on the repetitions, not only because, as we have seen, they aid in connection, emphasis, and rhythm, but because they materially contribute to the weird, reminiscent tone-color; and because there is contained in them a certain element of verisimilitude: an old man that has told his story over and over again might easily be expected to have his favorite thoughts and phrases. In this poem aesthetics and realism work hand in hand.

The meter secures the easy lilt and rapidity of movement so essential to a poem in which narrative plays an important part. Here there is the philosophy of action, of life, of character under stress; a philosophy

which is "sicklied o'er by the pale cast of thought" only in the few concluding stanzas.

Comparisons in literature, as elsewhere, were ever invidious. To say that "The Ancient Mariner" is a tuneful expression of a wholesome moral idea, enriched by original and suggestive fantasy, is perhaps an estimate with which neither author nor censor might quarrel.

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ODE TO MATHEMATICS^{*}

O come, thou great god Mathematic,
Come, most divine and most ecstatic,
Thee many men admire on earth,
And love to learn of thy true worth.
On thy letter-decked hand
Let Algebra grandly take his stand,
Accompanied by mysterious x ,
Often bound to puzzle and vex.
And then let come Geometry,
With cousin Trigonometry,
Bearing a sine and cosine, too—
Their union makes the tangent true,
And after all their friends appear,
Then shall I feel great joy and cheer.

REBECCA NADWOMEY

^{*} An imitation of Milton by a pupil in the Junior class of the high school at Bayonne, N.J.